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Older People and Online Social Interactions: An Empirical Investigation

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Abstract

We are investigating the role of online social interactions on the quality of life and well-being of people aged 65 years and over. We have conducted workshops and one-to-one semi-structured interviews, and have had free-flowing informal exchanges with our participants who have shared stories and incidents with us. Initial findings indicate that older people need an incentive to get and stay online; that relatives and trainers need to structure their help and use repetitive strategies to aid retention; that social networking is a step further than most older people take while email, Skype, and closed mailing lists or forums related to their interests are the most common applications for social interactions. Using social capital theory as a lens to look at the evidence, we find that existing social capital inherent in family and neighbourly ties seem to motivate older people to go online. Being online then allows people to maintain and renew relationships. We have yet to gather firm evidence for creation of new online relationships by older people.

Keywords: older people, online communities, senior citizens, service users, social capital, social connectedness

Introduction

In a year-long project (August 2012 to July 2013) in collaboration with organisations in the UK such as Age UK Milton Keynes, JISC TechDis and Milton Keynes branch of the University of the Third Age (MKU3A), we are investigating the role of online social interactions in supporting people aged 65 or over to sustain or even improve quality of life and well-being by avoiding or overcoming social isolation through social connectedness, supportive relationships and companionship. These online social interactions could be via email or Skype or participating in online communities such as on Flickr, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

The specific aims of our project are to investigate: a) motivations that people aged 65 and over have for participating in online social interactions; b) advantages that they experience in online social interactions; c) the obstacles that they encounter in engaging online; and d) whether there are particular risks for older people.

Through our findings related to motivations and advantages, we hope to raise awareness among policy makers about the possible significance of widening access to

the internet among older people and that going online must be made relevant and manageable within, and complementary to, the existing patterns of behaviour of older people. From our investigations on risks and obstacles, we will develop a set of resources such as checklists for addressing privacy and security concerns of older people in online interactions; and how different equipment configurations and devices such as iPads and tablets may be able to address the needs of older people. The target audience of these resources will be older people, their families and carers, care providers, website designers, IT equipment suppliers and trainers in local communities and voluntary organisations.

In this paper, we report the empirical investigations that we have carried out so far in our project. Our participant-set has been diverse: older people, family members and friends who have helped older people to get online or provide technical support or equipment, researchers of gerontology and social inclusion, ICT trainers, and representatives of local organisations who work with the elderly in the community.

Quality of Life, Well-being and Social Capital

Although ‘Quality of Life’ (QoL) and ‘Well-being’ are longstanding concepts, their application and evaluation in diverse contexts remains an area of active debate and research (ONS, 2011). The design of the research presented here is influenced significantly by two publications that have sought to synthesise, at an international level, contrasting and complementary approaches to assessment of these terms. The ‘Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress’ (Stiglitz, et al., 2009) provides a comprehensive overview of current diverse perspectives on QoL (Stiglitz, et al., 2009, Chapter 2). The ‘Compendium of OECD Well-being Indicators’ (OECD, 2011) presents a conceptual framework with specific indicators that enable comparison across OECD countries, and beyond. Both recognise that QoL and Well-being are multi-factorial and that some factors are objective whilst others are subjective.

The OECD compendium makes two useful distinctions. First, it distinguishes between ‘Material Living Conditions’ (income and wealth, jobs and earnings, housing) and QoL (health status, work-life balance, education and skills, social connections, civic engagement and governance, environmental quality, personal security, subjective well-being). Second, it distinguishes between what might be considered ‘momentary’ (or cross-sectional) indicators (all those listed here) and enduring resources (or forms

of capital) that need to be preserved over time in order to assure sustainability of well-being (Human Capital, Social Capital, Natural Capital and Environmental Capital) (OECD, 2011; p6). Whilst Social and Human Capital may be readily interpreted in many different contexts, including online communities, Natural Capital and Environmental Capital, as considered by the OECD, do not easily translate in the same way and need an appropriate reinterpretation (Grimsley, et al., 2007).

In beginning to explore the role of online interaction to the quality of life and well-being of older people, the research presented here has focused on ‘social connections’ and ‘Social Capital’, and on context specific aspects of subjective well-being.

Social capital theory provides a framework for examining relationships between people. Various theorists have defined social capital in slightly different ways to address different contexts (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1986, Coleman, 1988, Putman, 1993), but the root of the concept lies in the idea that people can access things of value because they have entered into relationships with others.

Social Capital is known to contribute value to individual QoL in a number of ways, perhaps most noticeable in terms of physical and mental health and subjective well-being. It also contributes to societal well-being, for example, through networks of reciprocal support that can facilitate pathways to employment, reduced neighbourhood crime, and enhanced child welfare (Stiglitz, et al., 2009; pp. 182-184).

In terms of assessing Social Capital, Stiglitz, et al. take the view that many of the commonly used indicators are inadequate proxy measures and that “[o]nly personal reports allow measuring the many and evolving forms of social connectedness” (p. 184). They advocate examining specific aspects of social connectedness: trust, isolation, and informal support (p. 185). Trust is a measure of the quality of social connections; isolation concerns the frequency of contact with diverse others; informal support concerns the perceived availability of family, friends and neighbours who “can be counted upon” when needed.

Preece (2002) suggests that online communities are a means to build social capital, arguing that communities with a lot of social capital have an easier life than communities without, and that online communities can help people survive better. Consequently, we would expect to find that older people would increase their social capital through being online.

Subjective well-being (SWB) is considered to have at least three distinct components: overall satisfaction with life; preponderance of positive feelings (such as pleasure,

enjoyment, happiness, vitality); preponderance of negative feelings (such as concern, anxiety, fear) (Stiglitz, et al., 2009; p. 146). Measuring ‘overall satisfaction with life’ presents particular problems, most notably because responses are sensitive to context and are difficult to ‘anchor’ (different people use different scales in different contexts). The second and third are more reliably assessed when they refer to specific experiences. In the context of this research, examples of experiences might include meeting new people online or dealing with unwanted communications (spam) or a threat from malware.

The research context

The world population is rapidly ageing. By 2030 over a billion people worldwide - 1 in every 8 of the earth’s inhabitants and almost double the current number - are forecast to be over 65. The global number of centenarians is projected to more than quintuple between 2005 and 2030 (National Institute of Aging, 2011). In the UK, 10.3 million people are aged 65 or over and this number is projected to increase to over 16 million in the next 20 years (Age UK, 2013). As and when increasing frailty or other life changes start to impact on people’s quality of life, whether living at home or in sheltered housing or in a care home, communication tools that help to overcome potential isolation and loneliness can be of value.

Digital inclusion can be a path to greater social inclusion. Indeed, a recent report (International Longevity Centre, 2012) concluded:

“[Older] people who reported not using the internet were more likely to say that they ‘often’ felt isolated from others. Conversely, people who said they did use the internet were more likely to respond that they ‘hardly ever or never’ felt isolated from others.”

Social inclusion of the elderly through digital inclusion can also provide a wider benefit to society by reinforcing the traditional central role that older people play in maintaining communities. Carroll et al. (2012) describe older people as “organisational firekeepers”, who maintain social continuity through their leadership roles in groups and communities.

Further, over the last few years, the private sector has been preferential to online customers (e.g., cheaper flight tickets) but now even the public sector is delivering services and products exclusively online or making the alternatives difficult to access. Many of the essential services will be digital by default in the future.

In our on-going literature review, we have come across papers investigating technology adoption by older adults: use of YouTube by older people (Harley and Fitzpatrick, 2009); use of gestural commands via touchscreen instead of mouse or trackball (Hollinworth, 2009); loneliness and need for social connection (Rodríguez et al., 2009); and perceptions of older people of social media (Xie et al., 2012).

However, our empirical research involves not only the older people but also their support networks of families, friends and neighbours, trainers and local organisations in order to investigate older people's online social interactions in a *holistic* manner. One of the policy recommendations of the report (National Institute on Aging, 2011) is that older people who are online should be encouraged to talk through their experiences. Our goal in this project is to consolidate and disseminate stories and anecdotes to encourage older people to get online.

Our investigations

The empirical research in our project is being carried out in accordance with the ethical considerations of our university's ethics committee. Written informed consent is sought before participation. The diverse participant-set (Table 1) in our empirical research has enabled us to gain insights from different perspectives: older people themselves, their relatives, neighbours and friends, academics (social scientists, gerontologists), local organisations that support older people, and ICT trainers.

Participant (number)	Method
Older people (27): 65-69 years (14), 70-79 (9), 80-89 (4)	Workshops, group interviews, one-to-one interviews using Skype (audio or video), email, face-to-face
Family members, friends, neighbours (13)	Workshops, stories via email, interviews on phone, Skype and face-to-face
Intermediaries (e.g. organisational representatives) (4), academics (8), and trainers (3).	Workshops, interviews, one-to-one meetings over phone, Skype and face-to-face

Table 1. Participants and research methods in empirical investigations

In our interactions with participants, we have focused on four aspects (based on the project's aims listed above) related to online interactions of older people: motivations, advantages, obstacles and risks. For example, in a workshop with older people, the facilitator from the research team introduced each aspect of interest for discussion, and then asked the participants to write their perceptions on Post-it® notes. These Post-it®s were displayed on flip charts (Figure 1) (sometimes grouped around a particular theme) to elicit stories of personal experiences and incidents.

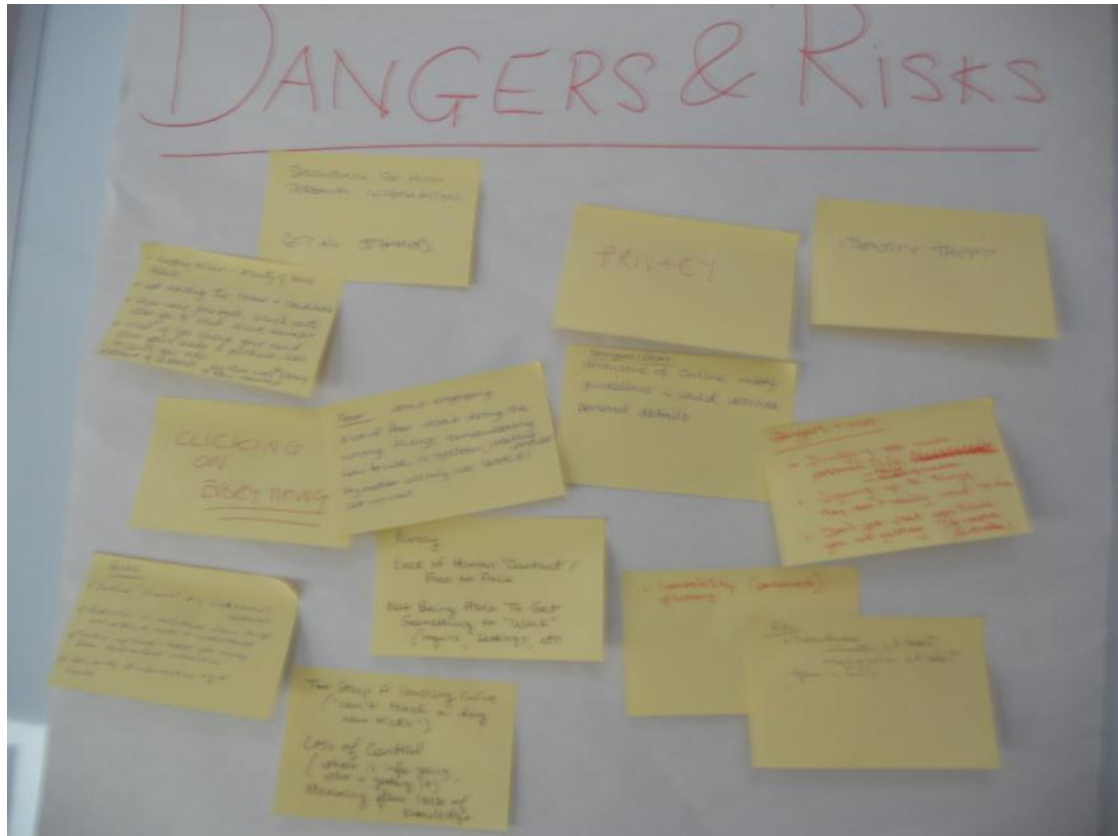


Figure 1. Post-it®s related to dangers and risks of online social interactions for older people as contributed by participants in one of our workshops.

The three workshops held so far have been recorded on audio and video. Depending on the convenience of participants, we have carried out semi-structured interviews and informal exchanges using email, Skype (video or audio only), phone and face-to-face, which have all been audio recorded. The variety of modes of contact means that we have been able to extend our participant-set to include people from Europe, Australia and the USA.

We have applied thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and used the four aspects (motivations, advantages, obstacles and risks) as a lens to look at the data and make sense of it. We have used [NVivo](#) software to collate, organise and interpret the qualitative data. The results are summarised below.

Results

To present our results in this section, we mirror our investigations into four main themes: motivations, advantages obstacles and risks.

Motivations for online social interactions

One of the motivating factors for the older people has been the ability to find information about their interests or to join online communities related to their interests

such as family history, quilting club, investment club, and so on. A daughter said about her father:

He tends to look up military bands [on YouTube], which is an interest that he has that he can't access physically.

Some offline communities such as in the church or a local club now send newsletters and meeting notes by email and that is another reason for getting online. An older participant said:

We did it with face to face before that and ordinary post. The committee meetings [of local history club] would come by post, but now they all come on the email.

One of the participants talked about his father acting as a mentor on discussion forums related to family breakups and fathers' rights:

Many older men go online to address and contain the anger of younger men, whose rights to access [to] their families have been taken away ... they [older people] target discussion to the legal issues and try to present rational argument and contain the venting of anger.

The main motivating factor is social connectedness with family. This is particularly important in situations where one or more members of a family live far away, most often in another country. One of the participants who influenced and helped her in-laws to get online said:

I encouraged them because they feel less in touch with the rest of the family since everyone is all spread out in different states ... since everybody [else] uses Facebook, they were missing out on pictures, etc.; now [mother-in-law] can post pictures and she usually shows [her husband] what everybody else is doing.

There is peer pressure too. A couple of older participants mentioned how they didn't want to feel left behind:

I just feel that it's really necessary and I don't want to get totally idiotic and not know what's going on.

I don't want to get left behind ... I feel I ought to go [online] because I would like to shop online at some point when ... I can't get out and about.

Organisations may be forcing people to go online. For some, the only way to get repeat prescriptions is via email. An older participant shared her experiences with us in a workshop:

Certainly, our doctor surgery... You know, repeat prescriptions ... you have to go in or do it via email.

Health or mobility restrictions force older people to get online for essential services such as grocery delivery, A participant mentioned about his parents:

Now they're getting older ... acquired an iPad... my dad's a bit unwell; my mum doesn't drive. So they're investigating getting Tesco... home delivery.

Even though our project's focus is on online social interactions, we have collected and analysed data pertaining to the catalysts (instigators) that get older people online which could be grocery shopping or online banking. Such task-driven adoption of the internet may encourage older people to involve themselves in online social interactions after they are comfortable with the technology and their skills.

Advantages of participating in online social interactions

In addition to social connectedness, our participants conveyed several benefits of being online. For example, they prefer the asynchronous nature of online interactions:

A big advantage is you're not restricted to time, so if you wanted to speak to somebody or put a message and it's 10 o'clock at night, you wouldn't phone, but with Facebook or mails ... they'll read it the next day ... if you can't sleep at night ... you're not annoying people.

A key benefit that has featured in our data is older people being able to easily access information:

We go to different places ... because ... you can access things we probably couldn't have done before much easier, and get more detail. I was able to Google this roof garden [in London] ..., and we're going to go there (Older woman and her husband)

I use it much more for trivia, Fred Astaire what was his last film he made before he died ... cos I love Fred Astaire. I really think it's fabulous for that, - wonderful - to have all that information (Single English woman, mid-sixties)

The older people feel that they have a voice and can contribute to initiatives at a distance. One of the participants recounted her mother's experiences:

My mum was a bit of a campaigner and she belonged to an NHS [National Health Service] patient forum and they had meetings and they shared a lot of stuff by email ... and when she could no longer get to meetings she could still make a valid input on documents and stuff.

A colleague who designs products with and for the older people mentioned how online social interactions can help in overcoming social isolation:

Decreased mobility may lead to older people becoming isolated. Online communities may help. I think a lot of deaf people, particularly people who lose their hearing in older age can become very, very isolated, so it [online interaction] is important.

Obstacles encountered

Obstacles ranged from lack of knowledge, poor user interface design and physical properties of technology, through cost and access to support, to bafflement in face of the file/folder structure.

The main obstacle is forgetting the instructions or passwords:

*...can't remember from one time to the next how to access web sites and aps
.... Remembering how to, time and memory, poor memory, keep forgetting
passwords...*

Consequently, many older participants in our sample-set keep a notebook with instructions, and sometimes with passwords.

Older people get tired, take longer to do something, which can cause websites to time-out so they cannot complete a task:

If you stop in the middle of it, you've probably lost it because it'll time you out
Relatives mentioned the difficulties of supporting their relatives at a distance when technical problems arise:

If the broadband stops working my mum will ring me up, "What shall I do?" I say what's on your screen? Which windows are open? She reads out from the screen. I guess she doesn't have the right vocabulary [to tell].

Some older people mentioned not having one-to-one support when they attend computer classes in the local computer centres, or being taught applications such as Excel that they perhaps do not need:

The trainer comes and pushes some buttons but does not explain.

One of our participants was annoyed that some training centres focus on certificates rather than on their learning:

The trainer said – press this button and you will get the certificate; but I told her – I don't want the certificate; I want to learn.

Older peoples find the organisation of files, folders, etc. on a computer confusing if they have not worked in an office environment in their working lives:

One thing hit me today. I wrote a letter to British Gas to tell them that our property.... At the end, I saved as, and I saved as, but I lost it completely, I couldn't find it anywhere, it had gone, vanished. I found it eventually. It took me all morning ... perhaps our age needs, particular members of our age need instruction on how to set up the filing system.

Older people are anxious about how they would be able to unsubscribe or leave an online community or mailing list:

...it depends on what kind of online community you're talking about I agree Facebook is very difficult to get out of...

If you've joined a community and you've realised you've perhaps joined the wrong community and you want to disengage from it, is that easier said than done? Once you've joined something, I know they usually put a little line if you don't want any more emails from a company you delete yourself from it, is that still feasible with an online community? ... They might not want to let you go. I don't know. It's just a question.

Perceived risks in online social interactions

Participants expressed concerns about privacy. For example, an older participant said:

The intrusion of privacy worries me ... it really makes me cross if, once you contact somebody with an email or something like that you keep getting harassed and stuff from them forever more, unless you have to unsubscribe and all that sort of thing.

One participant mentioned how her father was not comfortable about setting up a Facebook account with his real details because of concerns of privacy:

He uses it [Facebook] under alias so that only people whom he would like to connect with can connect with him – it is like a selective way of connecting with people – so people can't find him.

Participants are not aware of or are unable to set up the privacy settings in Facebook. During an interview, a participant asked us if we knew why she was receiving “friend” requests on Facebook from people she didn't know. We helped her to change the privacy settings in Facebook. However, we later on discovered in another conversation a few days after the interview that she had deleted her Facebook account:

I think it [Facebook] is silly. What they do when they get drunk and those sort of inane comments that don't really mean much to us [her and her husband].

This perception is backed up by a trainer, who said of first time users that he had supported in getting online:

They're ... sort of interested in Facebook, but it's only because they've heard the name. But once they get into it they probably think it was a mistake.

Older people are also concerned about the quality of information and whom they can trust:

...you go on to an online community - you ask for advice or information but there's no quality check on what comes back. In a way you've got to trust that the other person does know what they're talking about; they may not

A participant mentioned the concerns for her mother:

My mother is upset by the idea that she gets spam and junk mail. I don't think she understands that that's just part of the internet. You just ignore it and put it in the junk folder. She does get confused by you know the emails that you get which pretend to be from PayPal which aren't from PayPal.

This participant also mentioned how she checks the history on her parents' computer when she visits them to check that they are not going on to sites that are "risky".

Older people who did not use online groups were too innocent even to imagine adverse comment, but one more experienced participant was concerned:

Sometimes people put nasty comments on and that really I think it's so silly, and you've got to be so careful what you say, whatever your opinions are

In one of our workshops, a local community worker stated their concerns about the possible risks for older people:

risk of increasing isolation; ...becoming too dependent on online community and neglecting face to face participation; family and friends are on online communications and cease to visit; ...hurtful comments by others [in online interactions] and not having someone to share this with.

This was supported by a recently-retired lady, who uses the internet regularly, but commented:

It opens up the world a bit. But I still think you could do with more places where people meet. People to people contact as well because I think that's important, because you know days are long. If you've always been used to working then all of a sudden you don't get up to go. You've got to watch you don't end up like some people and don't get up because they haven't got anywhere to go. It's sad.

These concerns led us to investigate possible isolation, neglecting relationships and sharing. To investigate isolation, relationships and sharing, we specifically looked for evidence of social capital to see what was emerging, if social capital was reducing, or increasing as a result of being online.

Evidence of social capital in our data

In this section we identify influences of and on social capital in online activities of older people.

Keeping connected

Being online allows older people to feel connected socially. A grandmother in the US was able to use Skype to see where her grandson was living in Indonesia. She was "blown away" that she could see (on her iPad) the house he was living in.

One younger retiree said that she had learned about Facebook through her hobbies and voluntary work:

That's how you communicate with people really. The other thing is the drama group that I'm in, and I work as a voluntary worker at the local donkey sanctuary. They're both groups that are on Facebook. And they – I keep up to date on that.

Email was mentioned time and time again as a means of keeping in touch, learning what was going on in offline communities. The local church email was typically important but also the surprise email from a grandchild:

Nice little message from [him], the other day. .. "Thank you Nanna and Grandpa – I miss you".

This is the technology to use now, as one divorcee in her seventies said:

It's like when the penny post came and people could write letters to each other, and now we can email each other.

Being online might help loneliness as this very sociable widow suggests, although she doesn't use online resources frequently because she has an active offline life.:

I think it would be brilliant if you couldn't get out and you were desperately lonely.

Being online renews old acquaintances, as a single woman in her mid-sixties said:

Most of my friends, there are a few that I've contacted that I haven't seen for years. I've got a friend that moved down to Cornwall so it's great I'm in touch with her again... I've got a friend who lives in France and I'm in touch with him. A lot of them are people I see every week anyway.

Being online keeps up existing friendships; as discussed by one of our participants about his father in his eighties:

Email is a common thing. One of the things that started to make my father more interested is that he meets up with his colleagues still – this is 20 odd years after he retired. They go for meals and all the rest of it..

Being online allows sharing; a Facebook user in her mid-60s recounted:

one of my friends who found a really old – it's fabulous a 1930s book on housewives and the sort of things they should be doing, so every day now she sends us [on Facebook], a housewife tip, like "don't fold your tablecloth the same way every day because it creases". That's fun and we all laugh at that and we all put comments. That to me is what it's about - it's just enjoying silliness really.

People who help

In our data-set, almost all the helpers so far have been relatives with the exception of a couple of neighbours and three trainers. Relatives who spoke to us were usually sons or daughters of the older person, but we also have stories of grandchildren who helped and even trained their grandparents to get online. For instance, whilst his parents

drove them all on holiday, the grandson introduced his iPad to his grandmother. The daughter relates the story:

So, for most of the drive there, he [her son] introduced it [the iPad] to her, let her see how it worked, let her try it and she was very in awe of it. He said, "Isn't it cool?" and "Yes, yes," she loved it.

By the time they arrived at their holiday destination, the grandmother was playing games on the grandson's iPad and that evening the family gave her an iPad as a birthday gift. She wondered how she would learn to use it but her family assured her that they would help her.

Keeping up with pressure from others

Pressure to be online comes from children, government, businesses, and friends so some older people wish to stay up to speed with their peers:

We didn't push mum particularly hard but there came a point at which I think she felt that other people were using email a lot.

Deliberate connectedness – social networking sites

Some social sites are set up to connect people such as LinkedIn, Flickr, Twitter, etc.. However, most of our older participants did not join these, either displaying no knowledge of them, or eschewing them. An older participant mentioned about LinkedIn:

Yes, a load of rubbish and I got out of it. Totally useless as far as I'm concerned - too professional and I'm not in that line of business. I've got a presence on Twitter, and some people started following me but I've no knowledge of why they do because I just don't use it at all.... can't even tell you my hash tag.

Some older people look at sites but make no contribution. A single woman in her seventies has been in several forums for years including Facebook, LinkedIn, Horse and Hounds, but says that she's never ever contributed anything, not needing to because she has a busy life. She's always out at horse races and meetings, watching or judging and if she has anything to say she says it face to face to her friends, so has no reason to say anything in forums. A similar aged participant said that she didn't contribute to forums or online conferences unless she had something specific to say. People with busy offline lives don't see the need for an online network:

I would never join. I have too many friends which I can't cope with now. My social life is brilliant.

We have found that older people use and prefer alternative means of connecting like phone or face-to-face conversations or texting rather than using social networking platforms.

Losers despite being online

For some divorced men, dislocation from family is one cause of pain, and it might be argued that this is because they lose social capital by losing connections with their children. To alleviate the younger men's distress, some older men have set up an online forum to support and advise them, but the anger seems to pervade this forum to the point of being the norm, and thus side-lining the men without that anger.

The motivation aspects of this in-line community are interesting and varied. It is a depressing place to observe as many men on there have given up hope, whilst others bicker over content and control...the reason my father no longer participates. (Email from a son)

It's not that any new relationships have yet been built up, but rather that the young fathers have had social relationships removed from them in their real lives. Perhaps social capital is being rebuilt through the senior fathers providing online forums for information and support. The forums are the means to create, maintain and extend social capital. This example hints at a disadvantage of social capital – norms are powerful and can exert sanctions; lack of strong relations between children and parents could result in social capital lacking and lead to adverse outcomes (Coleman, 1988). These young fathers seem removed from structures that support relationships.

Relationship between social capital and being online

We expected evidence of increased social capital amongst the older people due to online social interactions but what we are finding is that having existing social capital makes it easier for older people to get online, and then maintain if not to create new friendships. For example, several older participants used neighbours or relatives to get them online:

We were lucky; we were surrounded by computer buffs, our children... (88 year old)

I had an aunt who has since passed away but who in her 80s after she was widowed and alone, and her children were not always with her, she decided she had to get online and she hired a young neighbour to come and teach her, put her online, show her ... and got into doing email in her last years and being in email correspondence with those of us who live many thousands of miles from her. But it all depended on a teenage neighbour (woman in her seventies)

Partners are particularly important; several couples or their children indicating that one partner in a relationship took a greater interest and being more comfortable with the technology supported the other.

I am really very digitally savvy in that I'm married to a physics professor (woman in her seventies)

Helpers as well as older people find partners important. This daughter's husband helped set up her nonagenarian mother's iPad before giving it to her:

Also, my husband, he played a real technical role in buying, going and getting it, picking it up and setting it up.

And sadly, if you don't have a partner, it's more difficult:

It makes a difference - I'm widowed so I don't have anyone in my home to help me. (widow in her late sixties)

Having started online, older people use existing relationships from relatives, friends and neighbours to support them:

I have a great friend who is a computer whizz, computer specialists, and I phone Dave if I have any problems. (67 year old)

I have a son and a daughter who are both extremely computer literate, and who do everything on tablets and all this sort of, they're up with all the latest stuff in iPhones and all these sorts of things, but, and if I get into a real strife, my son will come over and sort it out for me (Australian woman in her sixties)

We categorised older people into age ranges and noted some differences. Older people, in their sixties and early seventies have had experience of computers at work, or realised the need to get online and set themselves up sometimes buying in help. However, older people in their seventies and eighties lack work experience of computers and if responding to family pressure to get online, they continue to depend on family for technical help and advice.

Reflections on our findings

In this section, we discuss some of our practical findings and link them with what happens with the social capital of older people.

Some initial findings and recommendations from our empirical investigations are as follows: older people need an incentive to get and stay online. This could be a specific interest, for example, a participant was writing a book on his family's history; or it could be to maintain social connections with family, friends or communities of interest. One-off training on using the computer and internet does not suffice. Rather, relatives and trainers need to structure their help over a period, teaching one

application at a time through task-scenarios related to the older user's interests and using repetitive strategies to aid retention. Learning to open and save attachments to emails, the concept of folders, and what to do when faced with messages for system updates are aspects that repeatedly appear in the data. Social networking such as Facebook is a step further than many older people take, while email, Skype, and closed mailing lists or forums relating to their interests are the most common applications for social interactions.

Older people have had mixed experiences with the training centres. In some of them, the focus is on giving certificates which older people are not interested in if they are not looking for employment opportunities. Under the 'payment by results' funding formula, training centres often get funding only for people who complete a course and get a qualification. The interests of the training centres, therefore, are not aligned with the interests/needs of the learners (older people).

Some of the older people have received individualised training: so if somebody is interested in conducting research on family history, then the training should consist of task scenarios that involve family history websites. Such individualised training can motivate them to learn as they can see a purpose of getting online.

One of our participants was able to take her laptop to the local training centre where they set up bookmarks and anti-virus software for her. Such personalised help and training is not prevalent but can be extremely effective in motivating and supporting older people.

Unlike other researchers (Preece, 2002, Sum et al., 2008) who have suggested that being online increases social capital, our empirical data, which is more holistic in nature as it encompasses a variety of stakeholders including older people, indicates that older people get online because of existing social capital. Further, some of the older people have such busy offline lives that they don't see a need to go online. What seems to be happening is that using existing connections, their family and friends persuade or pressure them to go online and support them with practical help. Once the older people are online they discover the advantages, such as being able to maintain existing social relationships and perhaps renew old ones that distance had precluded.

Reflections on the research process

Recruitment and older people as co-researchers

We have recruited older participants through colleagues at work and in local communities where we work and live. A couple of older participants who have expressed keen interest in our project have become co-researchers in our project: they are recruiting on our behalf and are critically reviewing our research methods of interacting with older people.

Older people as advisors on the project

Some of our older participants with a background in volunteering and social work are critically reviewing our research methods of interacting with older people. One of them said to us:

You shouldn't have set questions or have paper in front of you with questions. You should ask them [older people, participants] for stories, incidents through some prompts and if they drift away from your research objectives, then you should bring them back - by saying - OK, tell me what happened when you did this... and so on.

We later on discovered that she conducts interviews about local history with the older people in her community and is an expert in interviewing older people.

Some of the participants have been discussing the policy and practice implications of our research such as how the older people should be trained to get online, how a system of technical support should be in place, etc., and how the training should be tailored to individual older people depending upon their interests.

The interviewer-participant relationship

Some older participants have asked ahead of their sessions, what questions we are going to ask. We have observed that older people like to be prepared before the session: "... 'not knowing' about what is going to be asked raises their anxiety" (Peace et al., 2006). Indeed, an expert in digital inclusion mentioned in her email to us:

There was a film made in our village about the [UK Queen's] Jubilee where they sat older people down and asked them what they remembered from [the] Coronation. ... They had clearly not been prepared for this ... they couldn't remember anything because they had nothing [on which] to specifically focus.

Older people are also anxious about the value of their contributions. A colleague's mother rang up her daughter immediately after the interview to check: "Did I do well?" They also look for validation during the interview, with queries such as: "am I

digressing too much?”. Interviewees are often keen to do the ‘right thing’ and be well-evaluated (Bracht & Glass, 1968). Being interviewed can be anxiety provoking too for people who are not used to being interviewed. It is probably not a common experience in everyday life that another person - for an hour or more - shows an interest in, and is keen to understand one’s experiences and views on a topic (Kvale, 2007). Therefore, it is important that the interviewer is able to address the interpersonal dynamics within an interview.

Research methods

In our interviews with older people, we have noted they prefer conversations where they can relate incidents and stories rather than follow a semi-structured interview protocol. We have noted that sometimes the entire interview has been around a specific theme that has influenced the participant. For example, in one of our interviews, the participant discussed only how older people should be trained to learn computers and the internet. This participant oversees the local computer centre and regularly appoints trainers to help the older people to get online. When we shared our experiences with a colleague who is an expert in qualitative research methodology, he said the following:

About 90% of studies are carried out on university students, who know how the ‘good participant’ is supposed to behave, and who fit into that role neatly. Older people are less likely to be familiar with that role, so they can behave in ways like the ones that you describe.

A member of our research team with extensive experience of working with older people in the community has suggested against using a structured or semi-structured interview protocol:

Conducting an] informal interview with an underlying formal structure has the edge because the language is tailored to the individual.

Therefore, we have adopted a relatively flexible interviewing strategy, adapting our approach according to what seemed important to the participants.

We plan to employ an interview guide or wheel to encourage conversation whilst maintaining a focus on the research aims at the same time. In (Peace et al., 2006), the researchers discuss how a wheel can enable older participants to have some control over the conversation without the anxiety of going ‘off topic’. The wheel (Figure 2) comprises of segments corresponding to our areas of interest (motivations, advantages, and so on) with some prompts. With our next set of participants, we plan

to evaluate the effectiveness of the wheel versus a semi-structured interview protocol or as complementary to the protocol.



Figure 2 Wheel with areas of interest and prompts to serve as an interview guide

The next steps

So far, our data relates to older people aged 65 to early 70s, plus two people in their early 80s. We plan to widen the age range: particularly those aged 75+ who may not have used computers and internet in their workplaces. In addition, so far in this project, we have interacted with older people who do not suffer from any cognitive impairment, or have any serious age-related constraints of mobility, etc. Our experiences, therefore, of conducting research with older people are rather limited as we have not yet faced the challenges of interacting with older people who have any age-related declines in sensory, perceptual, cognitive and communication abilities. The research methods and the ways of interacting with older people in workshops and

individual interviews will vary a lot to suit the specific age-related constraints of the participants.

In our current data set, with the exception of one participant who lives in an assisted living centre, all the participants live in their own homes. We shall investigate how different housing arrangements and, hence, personal or communal IT facilities can influence online experiences of older people. In our workshops, some disadvantages of older people being online have been mentioned: losing touch with their offline friends and interests or spending too much time online could be bad for health. Therefore, in the next stage of our research, we plan to investigate the disadvantages in addition to the four key aspects that we are already investigating. In the light of our results so far, we shall also be looking more closely at the role that social capital plays in getting people online.

We will continue to reflect on our experiences of conducting research with older people and the challenges that we face as our participant set becomes more varied during the project's timeline. We shall share our experiences in future publications of our project.

An accessibility expert on our team is consolidating the usability and accessibility aspects of website design for older people. We are also developing guidelines for online safety for older people involved in online social interactions. We shall disseminate these resources later this year.

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